# A Sociohistorical Perspective: Implications of a Quantitative Analysis of Japanese Interactional Particles

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> After all, language enters life through concrete utterances, (which manifests language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well.
>
> Bakhtin [1].

One of the salient features of Japanese is that it has a number of interactional particles loosely placed at various points of utterance in conversation (e.g., *ne, sa, yo, na)* [2]. Interactional particles are so essential to Japanese conversation that they have long been one of the major objects of research in the tradition of linguistic studies in Japan. Researchers of the Japanese language in the United States have applied various linguistic theories and analytical concepts to Japanese, attempting to provide systematic accounts for particles. Nevertheless the nature of interactional particles by and large remains nebulous. Why are interactional particles so elusive and at the same time so intriguing?

In this study I want to address this question by examining interactional particles from a Labovian socio-historical perspective, which underscores linguistic heterogeneity. However, I also want to go beyond it by invoking a Bakhtinian view of linguistic pluralism, in which the key emphasis is on individual speakers' utterances in communication. I point out that the standard Japanese formation is/was in fact a process of historical change which has taken place in the Tokyo area throughout the twentieth century, and argue that the complexity in the use of interactional particles is due to a

"transition problem" (Weinreick, Labov & Herzog, 1968) of on-going linguistic and social change (perhaps never to be completed).

## 2. Hypothesis

The hypothesis that I want to advance here draws upon the idea introduced by Malinowski (1920) that people talk not only to convey reflected thoughts and ideas but also to create ties of union between speaker and hearer. He viewed this function of language as "an indispensable element of concerted human action" (316) and named the type of speech in which this function is maximally manifested "phatic communion." In a society like Japan, where great importance is placed on "harmonious" interactions, such a function is perhaps one of the primary concerns for people when engaging in conversation. I suspect that particles in question have a great deal to do with this "phatic" function of language. Specifically, I propose (i) that interactional particles share the phatic function to various degrees, and (ii) that there are two aspects of the phatic function to be fulfilled by interactional particles, "channeling" and "speech act." By channeling I mean the function of signaling the phatic intention on the part of the speaker vis-à-vis "backchanneling," the phatic intention on the part of the hearer (Reynolds, 2000). I distinguish the channeling function from speech acts because channeling is conceptually different from speech acts, such as, interrogative, imperative, and declarative; the former being more a discourse factor while speech acts belong to the propositional meaning. The boundary between propositional and discourse semantics can be, however, quite fuzzy and it is more than likely that languages have forms fulfilling both functions simultaneously.

With these insights in mind, I turn to the sociolinguistic phenomenon of language standardization in Japan, part of the most revolutionary social change that Japan experienced, namely, modernization and industrialization

following the Meiji Restoration (1868). It is also useful to understand the change in a broader historical context. In his analysis of the intellectual discourse produced by philosophers during the eighteenth century, Sakai Naoki (1991) provides an excellent cultural framework for studying the linguistic change under consideration. He states:

> I argue that in the eighteenth century several positivities came into being, thanks to which a rigid partition between the inside of the "interior" and its "exterior" was formed. This separation resulted in a homogenization of the "interior," which in turn entailed the positing of absolute incommensurablity between the "interior" and the "exterior." This was the moment when the Japanese as a linguistic and cultural unity was born. (17)

"Linguistic and cultural unity" here, however, concerns the thought of the academic elite philosophers, and the event had little immediate influence on the life of ordinary people of Japan at the time. Until the Restoration, speakers of different regions had remained within their community throughout their life speaking their own dialect with little contact with other dialects. It was unusual for people to move from one region to another: newcomers were called *yoso-mono (*outsiders) or *nagare-mono* (drifters) and looked at with suspicion by the locals and had little chance to become in-group members of the community. During the period of industrialization and modernization subsequent to the Restoration, however, young Japanese, men and women, were motivated to move to big cities, especially, the Tokyo area, resulting in a highly heterogeneous language community. Thus, there occurred an urgent need to develop a "common" language. At the same time the government mandated a national language policy, obliging schools to teach the national language to all pupils. They needed to reinforce the "linguistic and cultural unity" by codifying it within the consciousness of common people. The

government policy towards a uniform Japanese and the people's need for a common language for communicative purposes generated an unusually strong trend towards "a common Japanese" and even an anti-dialect movement called *hogen bokumetsu undo* (a movement to annihilate regional dialects) was promoted without due criticism. What needs to be taken into consideration is the fact that interactional particles belong to the speech genre of vernacular Japanese and were certainly left out of the government's control. Any new particle system that developed in the linguistic heterogeneity of the Tokyo area had to be the result of spontaneous adjustment of people with different linguistic backgrounds to the need to communicate at work, school, and other areas of their daily life in the rapidly urbanizing new capital of the country.

Very schematically, I propose the following as the major changes in the area of interactional particles: before the Restoration there existed a number of regional dialects having their own "preferred" or "prototype" interactional particles (e.g., *yo, na* , and/or *sa)*; after the Restoration, a new variety (i.e., "common" Japanese) emerged from the interaction of speakers of different dialects and the interactional particles were gradually organized into a new system with *ne,* as the prototype and *yo, na, sa,* etc. as particles with more restricted or specialized purposes than in regional dialects. In the contemporary standard Japanese, as a result, there is one prototype interactional particle, *ne,* and several other particles with various specialized functions or sociolinguistic values.

In order to establish a starting point for understanding such an intractably complex state of affairs, I have conducted a comprehensive text counting analysis of an experimentally gathered set of conversational data. The findings are not of course conclusive but sufficiently supportive of my hypothesis. In section 4, I provide examples to show that at least three particles *yo, na* and *sa* function in regional dialects just like *ne* in standard Japanese, which should support my hypothesis. I conclude in section 5 that the

language standardization involved reorganization of particles from older particle systems such as represented in regional dialects to a new system such as represented by standard Japanese.

### 3. Data and Findings

The major resource of my study consists of data gathered by a group of Japanese sociologists for the purpose of an ethnomethodological study in 1983. They hired 16 female students and 16 male students and had each participant talk with a different partner, forming 32 dyads (10 male-male, 10 female-female and 12 male-female dyads). Several pairs were seated separately in a large classroom and instructed by the researchers to talk about "women's issues" or "issues of student extra-curricular activities" for 30 minutes. The given task was deliberately vague and general. The researchers transcribed all the conversations in Japanese.

I arbitrarily chose 21 conversations (7 from each of M-M, F-F and M-F pairs) from the 32 sets of conversation transcription and prepared a romanized database for my examination, to which I sometimes refer as "my data" in this study. The participants in the conversations were all 3rd- or 4th-year students (20 or 21 in age) from three large universities in Tokyo except one 23-year-old male student who was working towards his second bachelor's degree.

By examining the whole data, I have identified 7 monosyllabic interactional particles, *ne, sa, yo, na, wa, zo,* and *ze.* Interrogative particle *ka,* a nominalizer-like particle *no,* and complex particles *kana* and *kashira* were excluded. Table-1 shows the total number of instances of each particle in the data.

| ne | sa | yo | na | wa | zo | ze | total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3279 | 643 | 664 | 207 | 16 | 3 | 2 | 4814 |

Table-1: Frequency of particles

Notice that these particles are remarkably different in terms of the frequency; the first three *ne, sa* and *yo* occur most frequently; *na* is fairly frequent but not as frequent as *ne, sa* and *yo*; the last three *wa*, zo and *ze* are rather rare. Below I want to discuss three facts that I found.

### 3.1. Distributional differences

There are three contexts where particles can potentially occur: (i) sentence final position, (ii) sentence internal positions, and (iii) sentence external position. Examining the occurrences of each particle in terms of these positions, an interesting fact comes to light.

| | ne | sa | yo | na | wa* | zo | ze | total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (i) final | 1470 | 0 | 445 | 207 | 9 | 3 | 2 | 2136 |
| (ii) internal | 1737 | 647 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2386 |
| (iii) external | 74 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 74 |
| total | 3281 | 647 | 447 | 207 | 9 | 3 | 2 | 4596 |

Table-2: Distribution of interactional particles. (The total of instances of *wa* is only 9, which is less than the total occurrences of *wa* shown in Table-1 because Table 3 does not count the *wa* followed by other particles, such as, *yo* and/or *ne)*

*Ne* differs from other particles in two respects: it occurs in all three positions (i), (ii) and (iii) and it occurs with significantly greater frequencies than the others in all the three positions. This is one indication that *ne* is the "prototype" interactional particle: *ne* is so attenuative in its semantic content and so malleable in phonological realization that it can serve a wide range of communicative purposes by adjusting its length and intonation. In the following section I want to show how versatile *ne* is.

### 3.2. Functional Versatility of *ne*

*Ne* is the most privileged as a phatic marker in the sense that it can occur in all different positions. As is understood from the fact that it is often categorized as a sentence final particle, it occurs in the sentence final position with great

frequency. But it is misleading to call it a "sentence final particle" since it also occurs in sentence internal positions even more frequently than in sentence final position. *Ne* occurs almost anywhere within a sentence after nouns, adjectives, or adverbs except that it must follow particles with grammatical functions, such as, case markers (*ga, o, ni, to, de,* etc.) or other particles indicating topicalization (e.g., *wa* and *tte),* presuppositions (e.g., *mo* 'also,' and *sae* 'even') and fuzziness (e.g., *toka),* if such functions are expressed. *Ne* can occur after discourse connectives or discourse adverbs : e.g., *dakara ne/sa* (therefore), *de ne/sa* (and), *demo ne/sa* (but), *tada ne/sa* (only), *tonikaku ne/sa* (anyway), etc. Another place where *ne* can freely occur is after pause fillers: e.g., *yappari ne/sa, ano ne/sa, sono ne/sa, koo ne/sa, nanka ne/sa, eeto ne sa, uunto ne sa, maa ne/sa. etc.*

The versatility of *ne* is shown in the fact that it is the only particle that can occur by itself, in sentence external position, expressing the phatic meaning to the fullest potential. It can express quite complex implications as in the following example.

Example (1) ([.../...?] and [.../...//] respectively indicate question and affirmative sentences with the material after the slash being an afterthought.)

1 F1: demo ochadai toodai no jointo tte yuu katachi ni
2 natte-ru n desu ka/ warito?
3 F2: soo desu// warito soo ne/ chuushin wa//
4 F1: nee?// soo-yuu fuu ni nacchau to ii n da kedo ne

[Translation]

F1: But is it in the form of a joint club of Ochadai and Toodai, sort of?
F2: That's right. It is, sort of, as far as its core.
F1: See?! It would be nice if it is once established that way...

The *nee* here (line 4), at least twice as long as the short syllable *ne* pronounced with a deep rising intonation, conveying a great deal of sentiment: the implication is something like <You must understand now why I asked you the question (F1's first utterance). I knew that your situation was much better than ours, and your answer has proven I was right. See?> In some other contexts *nee* would be pronounced with an intonation falling from the highest to the middle level expressing that the utterer is in total agreement with what has just been said by the other. The "independent" *ne* is also typically used when starting a conversation appearing like an attention getter or a conversation starter when the speaker-hearer relationship is sufficiently intimate, (e.g., between family members and intimate friends). The versatility of *ne* is evident.

*Sa* is exactly the same as the internal position *ne*. There is a slight difference between *ne* and *sa*, the former being the unmarked and the latter marked and thus slightly less appropriate in some contexts. More significant for my purpose is that *sa* occurs only sentence internally in standard Japanese while *ne* occurs anywhere.

### 3.3. Channeling Particles and Speech Act Particles

The data includes *ne, yo, na, wa, zo,* and *ze* as final position particles, conveying various types of speech act meanings, such as, strong, mild or weak insistence[3]. This study is not concerned with the semantic characterizations of these particles, but focuses on the fact that *ne* has a different status from other sentence final particles although it can convey some speech act meanings. Since it occurs as frequently in the sentence internal position as in the final position and it can occur independently of the proposition, I argue that *ne* differs in a nontrivial way from *ne, yo, na, wa,* and *zo* (and others such as interrogative *ka*), which are more or less limited to the sentence final position, the regular syntactic position for speech acts. *Ne* is a particle that

signals the speaker's channeling intention and channeling can be done at any point of discourse, outside a sentence structure, within a sentence and at the end of a sentence. When it occurs at the sentence final position, the channeling intention can be interpreted as the speaker's intention to share the information of the proposition that has just been stated.

There are at least three more reasons why I consider *ne* to not be a final particle. First, it can occur with a particle which is more clearly a speech act marking particle, *ka, yo,* or *wa*. Second, there is the order constraint that *ne,* when occurring in combination with another particle, must be placed at the outermost position. Thus, endings, such as, *ka ne, yo ne,* and *wa ne* are common, but sequences like **ne ka, *ne yo, *ne wa* are impossible. Third, a sentence final particle always occurs as the final part of the intonation unit [S – particle] but *ne* can occur as a phonologically independent unit , i.e., there can be an intonation break between the [S] intonation unit and the [*ne*] unit. All these facts can be consistently explained on my analysis: channeling is a discourse phenomenon and speech act is part of the operation at the sentence level.

**4. Particles in Dialects**

The situation in which the samples of my data were taken is very close to the situation in which common Japanese might have been produced and reproduced: most of the participants of the conversations are from areas distant from Tokyo and they are native speakers of different dialects. They must have learned what is considered to be standard Japanese through media or school education rather than from their parents or peers through actual use, but they all talked in standard Japanese in the recorded conversations without any obvious trace of their native accent. There is no guarantee that what sounded like standard Japanese were in fact "interlanguages" close to standard

Japanese especially in the area of particles. In this section I want to give facts concerning how particles are used in local dialects.

In the Kansai dialects (spoken in Osaka, Kyoto and other areas in western Japan) it is *na* that is the most prominent as an interactional particle. *Na* occurs in all positions that *ne* can occur in standard Japanese.

In my home town dialect, spoken in a rural area in the central part of Chiba Peninsula, it is *yo* that is used with great flexibility. The following excerpt is what my 85-year-old mother, a Chiba dialect native, said on the telephone in June, 2000.

Example (2) (The numbers in square brackets are given for the convenience of the readers who need to refer to the English translation.)

[1] niwa ni yoo [2] huton ga <u>yo</u> hoshite-ak-kara <u>yo</u>
[3] irete-oite-kun-nai?

[Translation]
[1] in the yard [2] futon mattresses are spread for airing
[3] so will you put them away (in the house)?

We have seen in the above that interactional particles *yo, na,* and *sa* are restricted in the positions that they can occur in standard Japanese. In this local dialect, however, they are as flexible and malleable as *ne* in standard Japanese. My grandmother used to tell us stories using <u>yo</u> like "[1] *mukaashi mukashi* <u>*yoo*</u> [2] *jiisan to baasan ga* <u>*yo*</u> [3] *ita ttsu* <u>*yoo*</u> ([1] a long long time ago, [2] an old man and an old woman, [3] there were, they say)". *Na* may have been occasionally used instead of *yo* in the story. Speakers of this dialect of my generation differentiate them as follows: *na* is used by male speakers (or social superiors) and *yo* by both sexes (or social inferiors). I remember a number of occasions when my sister-in-law started a conversation with her

husband uttering "*Yoo!*" gently and deferentially. My brother would use *naa* (never *yoo)* calling to his wife while he would use *yoo* when talking to his parents. I don't know how long this differentiation between *na* and *yo* in terms of power or status has existed. I remember that my grandparents on my mother's side used *yo* reciprocally. The point here is that both *na* and *yo* can occur almost anywhere, in final position, internal position, or externally, expressing a wide range of discourse or pragmatic meanings depending on how they are pronounced.

As for *sa,* studies in the United States include examples, such as, *Mado ga aite iru sa* (The window is open), in which *sa* occurs in the final position following the finite form of the predicate. They often state that *sa* conveys strong assertion of the speaker's ego and it is used by male speakers. In my data, however, no instances of the final or external *sa* were found. It seems that the use of *sa* in sentence final position is marginal in contemporary standard Japanese. Like *na, wa, zo* and *ze,* the final *sa* is often used in quotations in novels—for stereotyping — but it is not used in actual ordinary conversations. This is another factor that confuses observers of particles. I will not get into details of this issue here.

In my hometown dialect, again, the particle has quite a different value. It can be placed in the final position following the finite form of the predicate. I remember some adult women's utterances ending with *sa* in a rather polite tone. For example, when I visited my elementary school girl friend to play with her and found her not home, her mother used to say *dekakechatta desu saa* 'She is gone out' pronouncing *saa* with a High-Low intonation and thus showing great sympathy towards me.

In an TV educational program "Furusato Nippon no Kotoba (Japanese Languages in Hometowns)" telecast August 27, 2000 on Channel 9 in Honolulu, I observed the following dialogue by women in Tottori Prefecture, west of Kyoto.

Example (3)

1. F1: konaida wa ee yuri moratte sunmasenandaa// ee nioi ga shitee~
2. F2: ( )
3. F1: niotta niotta
4. F2: (ee nioi ga ...)
5. F1: saa [nodding]

[Translation]
F1: Thank you so much for giving us such beautiful lilies the other day. So fragrant...
F2: ( )
F1: They did smell, indeed.
F2: (Fragrance of lilies ... )
F1: I know! [nodding]

F1 was a woman probably in her fifties on her way to a neighbor's farm to give some assistance. She saw F2 working in the field and thanked her for giving fragrant lilies. F2, standing some distance from the camera, was not heard clearly, but it was not difficult to understand that the two women were exchanging words about the "fragrant lilies." A sample case of "phatic communion." F2, saying something to the effect of "lilies have excellent fragrance," F1 utters a prolonged *saa* (line 5) with an expressive intonation similar to the intonation of *nee* used in a situation like this by speakers of standard Japanese. I am certain that there are many other dialects that retain the use of *sa* as versatile as *ne* in standard Japanese or as *yo* in my hometown dialect. It would not be then too far-fetched to think that *sa* also has existed in regional dialects as a prototype interactional particle, as a carrier of various intonations, expressing a wide range of contextual meanings.

If it is the case that interactional particles *na, yo,* and *sa* in standard Japanese have indeed come from various local dialects, then, the fact that these particles occurring in different positions in standard Japanese would be most naturally explained as follows. Because more than one particle with the

same prototype status could not coexist within one system, they had to be reorganized into a new particle system. In the new system, the channeling function and the speech act are distinct from each other, and particles with the function, either channeling or speech act, have taken on different functions/meanings: *sa* has been gradually limited to the sentence internal channeling function while *ne* developed into an unmarked (=omnipresent) channeling particle; *yo* has become a sentence final particle for declarative speech act and *na* took on some special speech act function which needs to be coded in terms of how it is actualized in utterance.

An important question remains to be answered. "Where has *ne* come from?" I do not know of any regional dialect with *ne* as a prevailing interactional particle. I suspect that *ne* was a new form developed from the combination of *na* and (*y*)*e*, (*y*)*e* being an older channeling particle. Particle combinations of *na-i*, *zo-i*, *wa-i*, and *ka*-i are found in Kabuki dialogs and perhaps they are found in the speech of older speakers of some regional dialects. My father occasionally called to my mother with *yei* or *nai*. If *ne* was a new interactional particle developed from *na-i*, then it makes sense that the whole system of particles has been reorganized with *ne*, which had no direct affiliation with any regional dialect, as the major interactional particle of the emerging city language and reassigning more limited functions and values to the particles from regional dialects.

As the concept of standard Japanese was formed among the Japanese people, and as standard Japanese gained prestige, regional dialects became socially inferior varieties and were not paid much attention by the Japanese language scholars except by dialectologists. As mentioned in the above, interactional particles are not totally within the boundary of grammatical studies and they continued to change in the interactions of people who have moved to the city.

## 5. Conclusion: Standard Japanese as a new variety

The immigration of people from different regions of Japan to Tokyo began during the time of modernization and industrialization and it still continues. Every year new people move into Tokyo as students or as workers. According to a survey conducted by the NHK in 1996 only 57.1% of the subjects were Tokyo born and only 30.5% had Tokyo born fathers, and 29.5% Tokyo born mothers [4]. Adding to this the large population commuting from neighboring prefectures, Tokyo is quite heteroglossic underneath its uniform and steady appearance. Until TV came of age, dialect speakers had not been sufficiently exposed to conversational standard Japanese, and people who had moved to Tokyo had often experienced great difficulty in communication. Recently I met a student from a northern part of Japan, who spoke standard Japanese so perfectly that I couldn't believe that he was actually from such a remote place. He had joined a theater group to "learn to pronounce Japanese beautifully," he said.

The difficulty for natives of regional dialects to communicate in standard Japanese resembles that of second language acquisition. Researchers of second language acquisition say that many language learners who have learned grammar well often fail to perform speech acts properly. Then it may be the case by the same token that many regional dialect speakers learn standard Japanese well in the area of lexicon and grammar but rather idiosyncratically in the area of pragmatics and discourse, producing an infinite variety of "interlanguages" or "transitional dialects." Interestingly, we seem to hear *sa* in internal positions more and more often even in semi-public contexts. Also to be noted is the observation that younger people use a rising intonation instead of sentence internal *ne* or *sa* as if it is a new phatic communication strategy. It is so commonly observed that Japanese linguists call it *hangimon* (quasi-question) and speculate what *hangimon* does. When will the process of standardization of Japanese be completed? In Bakhtin's

view, language as the total of individual processes of dialogic creation may always be incomplete and "uncompletable." Then, the complexity that we have observed in the area of interactional particles is not a "transition" problem of any particular time, but it is a normal state of language.

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**Notes:**

1. Bakhtin (1986). P. 63.
2. I prefer this term (used first by Senko Maynard) because it does not imply, unlike the more common term "sentence final particle," that these particles occur only in sentence final position, which is not true as shown in this study.
3. It is not that *yo* never occurs in nonfinal position in standard Japanese. But the use of *yo* in nonfinal position is limited and it is pronounced with an emphatic fall-rise intonation. Below is one of the two cases of the internal *yo* in my data.

   M: moshi boku ga karini yo kyooshi ni ..... naru to shitara
   'if I supposedly become a teacher, then ...'

   The *yo* in this example is inserted after the adverb *karini* 'supposedly' to place an extra emphasis on the conditional meaning of the conditional clause . If this *yo* is pronounced with a falling intonation like the *yo* in my grandmother's story, the speaker may be suspected of being an "unsuccessful learner" of standard Japanese.
4. I owe this information to Prof. Hiroshi Ishino, Josai International University.

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